

“Good Works” | Ephesians 2:10

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(Discussion questions on page 7)

A person’s “lifestyle” refers to their overall pattern of living—habits of physical and mental health, how we spend money, hobbies, way of dress, social groups with whom we associate.

It’s a surprisingly new term, “lifestyle.” It was first introduced by a psychologist (Alfred Adler) in 1929 to refer to a person’s character as established in childhood. Only since the 1960s has it been used to refer to someone’s broader way or style of living.

What are some trends in American lifestyles? A 2024 survey notes five: less alcohol consumption, finding ways to slow down, the use of Mental Health apps, eating healthier, and new ways to exercise.¹ These trends have this in common: people are concerned with their own health; we place a premium on doing ourselves good.

The idea of lifestyle flows through Paul’s thought in Ephesians 2:1-10. It’s captured by the term “walk” or “walking.” We see a total transformation in lifestyle between the beginning and end of this passage. Those who “once walked” “in trespasses and sin,” “following the course of this world” (2:2), find themselves by the end of the passage walking in **good works**. Here is how Paul describes the lifestyle of someone who has been transformed by God:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10).

Up to this point, Paul has been adamant that God’s redemption has nothing to do with our good works, and everything to do with God’s profound grace:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast (2:8-9).

But lest we should think grace breeds license, or God’s mercy makes us indifferent, Paul closes the circle in verse 10: All this work of God—choosing us, saving us, sanctifying us—is for the purpose of a new lifestyle; a lifestyle marked by “good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (2:10).

The Gospel generates goodness—that is the point of our passage today.

This lifestyle turned heads. Historians like **Rodney Stark** (*The Rise of Christianity*, 1996) and **Tom Holland** (*Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, 2019) have noted that Christianity’s success has been due, in part, to its adherents’ habits of sacrificial love. Holland, in

¹ <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/lifestyle-trends>

his book *Dominion*, even argues that the West's penchant for philanthropy and justice is really a fruit of a yet-lingering Christian worldview.

An example of this impact is seen in letter written by the **Roman Emperor Julian** in AD 359. Julian was advocating Rome's return to her Greek gods, and in a letter to the pagan priests of Galatia, writes:

It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [these are Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.¹ Teach those of the Hellenic faith to contribute to public service of this sort, and the Hellenic villages to offer their first fruits to the gods; and accustom those who love the Hellenic religion to these **good works**.²

The Christians were caring not only for the needy in their congregations, but for those in the larger city. Whatever happened to these people, a peculiar passion for good works was a hallmark of their lifestyle—and people noticed.

While our goodness doesn't earn us the Gospel, the Gospel of free grace generates goodness. We'll consider this today by considering Ephesians 2:10 in relation to the larger passage. It's important to notice that good works come up only after Paul has spent nine verses saturating us in grace. It's equally important to notice that Paul's exaltation of grace is not complete until he celebrates its fruit of good works.

So, the Gospel Generates Goodness, and this will mean that Christian good works have something unique about them. We will consider this uniqueness by making three observations: **(1) Christian good works begin with God's work on us; (2) Christian good works are fueled by God's Love in us; (3) Christian good works are not a to-do list, but lifestyle.** So, Christian good works in light of *God's Work*, *God's Love*, and a *godly Lifestyle*.

I. Good Works Begin with God's Work on Us

Paul is trying to avoid two errors in Eph 2:1-10. First, he does not want Christians thinking their relationship with God depends ultimately on moral works. We are saved by grace through faith. He's emphasized this from verses 1-9.

But there is an opposite error that can arise at this point: *faith without fruit*, or "cheap grace."

Notice how Paul continues to navigate these pitfalls in verse 10, but fronting his statement about our "good works" with God's prior work: "We are his workmanship; created in Christ Jesus *for* Good works" (2:10).

² Julian the Apostate, Letters (1923) Works vol. 3, pp.2-235. 22. To Arsacius, High-priest of Galatia [362, on his way to Antioch in June?] https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm

Article 12 of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles is titled “Of Good Works,” and refers to this relationship between God’s grace and our good works:

Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

William Tyndale, writing sometime before, succinctly states it, “Deeds are the fruit of love, and love is the fruit of faith.” So good works are the fruit, not the root, of the Christian life.

Our understanding of Christian good works, therefore, begins by noticing how they related to God’s work on us: “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for Good works.” This suggests several important lessons for us to consider.

First, when it comes to good works, we ourselves are one such work. And we won’t produce the types of good works Paul has in mind, unless we are first worked on by God. Wherever a Christian finds themselves today, they are in God’s workshop. Whatever external good work they are focused on, before they lift a finger, they are themselves a good work.

And how does God work on us?

He refines us. And it can be at times intense. Can you picture a blacksmith in his shop, or a potter in her studio, or a woodworker or painter hard at work. There are sounds and smells and heat and pressure. And the works of their hands takes time—often painstaking time.

This ongoing refining work is the work of the Holy Spirit. The spirit indwells the Christian. And the Spirit is called holy not only because of the Spirit’s own nature; the Spirit is called holy because the Spirit aims to make holy whatever vessel he makes his abode.

The Spirit has myriad tools and methods. He will convict of sin, place an idea in the mind, nurse a sense of peace or unsettledness in relation to decisions. The Spirit will work through the Word of God, cutting away at old habits, dispelling bad mindsets, cultivating clearer thinking.

Two primary ways God goes to work on his people are the Spirit and sufferings. But notice that in all these things, “we are *His workmanship*.”

Before we do good works, we are a good work—a work of God.

Second, this priority of God’s work before our good works suggests a strategic relationship between the pattern of our refinement and the particular works God has foreordained for us to do. You will often notice that suffering God has been walking you through, or the sin he has been delivering you from, fits you with the very balm that a friend will need later.

This is the first thing to notice about Christian good works: God works on us, before we work for him. And second point takes us into the inner features of God's work on us.

II. Good Works Are Fueled by God's Love in Us

You do not need to be a Christian to care for people. Because we are all made in the image of God, there is a natural part in us that rises up in compassion when we see others in need. This part can be desensitized by sin, but you'll still see it there even in the most hardened criminal when he sees his own child, or mother, in pain.

But there is something deeper than natural compassion that fuels Christian good works.

Paul says, "we are His workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus* for Good works" (v.10). "Created in Christ Jesus" tells us that the energy at the core of God's work upon us is **divine love**. It is the love which loved us while we were still sinners, and laid down its life for us. Divine love is the motivating force behind God's mercy and grace—a logic we see in verses 4-5:

But God, being rich in mercy, **because of the great love with which he loved us**,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved" (2:4-5).

This divine love is no abstraction. It enters our hearts as a spiritual reality by the Holy Spirit:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit... (Rom 5:5).

Essential to seeing the uniqueness of Christian good works, is understanding the transforming effect of divine love in the soul of a man or woman.

I will briefly consider four ways that divine love fuels good works that is different than natural compassion.

First, it is a love that humbles us. How so? Because it was initially offered to us while we were dead in our sins. It is a love that is first experienced by us as grace, or it is not experienced at all. We did not earn it, but received it by a humble trust, faith. Paul highlights the inner disposition this divine loves generates when he explains in verse 9 that it is "not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (v.9).

Boasting is pride. Pride is the great enemy of good works, because pride focuses love toward the self, rather than the other. To realize, however, that we are sinners who are spiritually dead unless God's grace comes to us, is to begin to experience a divine love that gently lowers the heart, frees from shackles of self-obsession.

Second, divine love inclines us rightly toward others. Divine love is the love that God has toward his creation. And just as a child comes to value the things that a father or mother values, so too,

a child of God comes to love what their heavenly Father loves. Divine love inclines us towards the true nature of people—that they are creatures made by God. If I only have human compassion to fuel me, I will struggle to love my enemy or an evil person. But if divine love has taught me not only that all people are created by God, but also the way of grace and mercy, I can begin to imagine loving even an enemy. Divine love moderates and quiets our inordinate offense toward others. A sinner who knows grace is not quick to see faults in others, but quick to show mercy.

Third, divine love is an endless fountain, whereas human compassion a cup that runs dry. Natural good works are often grounded in worldly causes. These causes are set before us and excite our compassion. But when the world changes, or grows fatigued by an issue, so does our love. Natural love is sourced from the reservoir of human will; divine love comes from the fountain of eternal passion.

Fourth, divine love loves the whole person—spiritual and physical: a recurrent theme in church history is that Christians have a hard time holding together the spiritual and social goods. A focus on one often leads to the neglect of the other.

But notice that Paul has both in this passage; but also notice the order and balance: the Gospel of salvation, that gives life to our souls and delivers from sins, is exalted for nine verses. And only then are we prepared to turn to good works.

This challenges us to hold these things together, but also to properly emphasize the need of our souls for God's love: "man does not by bread alone; but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

It also tells us that the more we linger in what God has done for us, the more we sit with the Lord, abiding in his love for us, the more our lives will reflect the fatherly compassion of our Lord.

Charles Spurgeon is a great example of a pastor who got the balance right. He was the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century. When he came to the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London in 1854 (at the age of just nineteen), the city was a monument of human need. Through the eyes of Charles Dickens, we have seen the factories filled with children working, the debtors' prisons, the filth and crime and poverty. Thus, while Spurgeon is known as an unapologetic preacher of the Gospel, his church soon became the harbinger of many good works. One of his biographers writes,

As Spurgeon gained more exposure to the acute and diverse [needs] facing London, he aggressively launched dozens of ministries and organizations to combat suffering and poverty in the city. By 1884, these benevolent ministries numbered sixty-six in total and included an orphanage, a ministerial college, a subsidized housing for poor widows, a

clothing bank, a ministry to prostitutes, several street missions, and host of children's ministries.³

Spurgeon knew that good works were not the source of our salvation; but he also knew that they are an inevitable fruit arising from those who have been filled by divine love.

Let us turn now in our final point, to how we practice these, or walk in good works.

III. Good Works Are Not a To-Do list, but Lifestyle

Paul concludes his thought with the image of walking: "prepared beforehand for us to walk in" (2:10). "Walking" is a common image in the Bible for a way of life—a lifestyle. Paul does not here enumerate a list of good works, though later in the letter he calls for all sorts of good acts these Christians are to do to each other. But if we step back and consider Scripture, we might suggest some things about the lifestyle, the "walk," of a doer of good works.

So, while we could spend the end of this sermon listing off specific things we might do that are good, I would prefer to close with one general observation, and a few brief reminders about steps we may regularly take in living a lifestyle of good works.

The general observation is this: Because we are each God's unique workmanship, we will not all be called to the same good works. Some of us will have gifts and passions different than others. Different seasons of life, moreover, will afford different opportunities for good works. A mother of four may need to focus her good works on her own children primary, while an empty nester may find her heart drawn toward under-resourced children at a local school. But as we abide in the love of God, we will find ourselves guided by the Spirit to do good works for those who are in need around us. Four forms these works may take, which I see in Scripture, include:

Speech: later in this letter Paul say to his readers:

let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor....Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (4:25, 29).

Our lifestyle is marked by speaking words that are good for others.

Giving: Second, we often see people in Scripture doing good by giving. Paul writes of the relatively poor Christians in Macedonia,

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia,² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.³ For they gave

³ Alex DiPrima, *Spurgeon and the Poor: How the Gospel Compels Christian Social Concern*, pp. xix-xx.

according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” (2 Cor 8:1-4).

Doing: Third, Christians walk in good works by *doing*. The Good Samaritan is perhaps the most well-known example, but doing takes many forms: helping out someone who needs a ride; taking a meal to someone who has just had a baby, or been sick; volunteering in the community; hosting a Fellow; discipling students in our youth ministry or through Young Life; inviting someone with few friends to join you for lunch this week at school.

Suffering: finally, a Christian lifestyle of good works is one that is willing to suffer for others. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends,” teaches Jesus (John 15:13). As Christians, we come from a long line of saints who did good to those in need, even to their own hurt—sometimes at the cost of their lives.

I’ll close with this final thought: there is a secret sweetness the doer of good works experiences. It is when in loving someone else, we feel the Father’s love for us—His very love, flowing to us, and through us. The happiest saints I know are those who because they have been saved by grace, live a lifestyle of good works.

Let’s pray

Small Group Questions

1. While our good works do not earn us God’s love (Eph 2:1-9), Ephesians 2:10 tells us that God’s love in us produces good works. Can you think of an example of a Christian in your life who has modeled the fruit of good works? What are some ways they did this?
2. How might the Gospel—where God sacrificially loves us even while we are in sin—cultivate a desire to do good for others? List a few ways.
3. How does the calling to walk in good works make you feel? Excited? Tired? Guilty? Overwhelmed? How do you think God wants it to make you feel?
4. Take some time to think of a few good works God may be calling you into this week—in your family, your church community, and the world around you. Maybe write a few of these thoughts down and pray over them. See what kind of fruit the Holy Spirit may foster through you this week!